EARTH SUMMIT IN FOCUS

Number 1

THE '92 PROCESS: THE UNITED NATIONS PREPARES FOR THE EARTH SUMMIT

United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

For Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the message is clear: When the leaders of the world's Governments gather at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992 for the two-week Earth Summit, they must commit themselves to action that will prevent a worsening of the environmental crisis which threatens the collapse of the planet.

"For that commitment to be made," said Mr. Strong, "when Government leaders go to Rio, they need to know what people want. The power of the people will be behind the leaders at the Summit. Whatever happens at the Summit will depend on peoples at its base everywhere".

Before agreeing on what must be done, the Conference must devise plans for sustainable economic development: plans that do not rely on poisoning, depleting or destroying the natural resources—air, water, earth—on which we depend for life.

That is no simple task. The UN General Assembly, when it called for UNCED in December 1989, set up a Preparatory Committee under the chair of Ambassador Tommy Koh of Singapore to do the work. The Assembly gave the Committee two and a half years to come up with a comprehensive plan of action and ways to implement it. The process of doing so is known as the '92 Process.

The Assembly also asked Mr. Strong, who is Canadian, to put together a secretariat of UN staff members with expertise in UNCED's subjects to assist him in his work for the Preparatory Committee. The Committee scheduled five sessions: an organizational meeting (March 1990, New York); the first substantive session (6-31 August 1990, Nairobi); two more substantive sessions (18 March–5 April and 12 August–4 September 1991, Geneva) and a final session (9 March–3 April 1992, New York).

All Paths Lead to Brazil

The Earth Summit will be a very public culmination of months of work by Government representatives, the UNCED secretariat, staff of all the UN programmes and agencies, and non-governmental experts. Much of the work is taking place behind the scenes. It is a process of analysis, synthesis, report-writing, proposal-making, meetings, negotiation and revision that, hopefully, will lead to agreement in Brazil on issues of major importance to the continued survival of human, plant and animal life on the planet.

All five UN Regional Economic Commissions have held (or plan to hold) meetings to formulate plans for sustainable development in their region. The UNCED secretariat has convened Working Parties of experts drawn from the UN system and non-governmental groups on many of the topics on the agenda of the Preparatory Committee. These meetings have been part of the process of preparing the reports requested by the Preparatory Committee from the UNCED secretariat to assist it in

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its work. Some UN bodies, such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) and the UN World Meteorological Organization (WMO) have organized meetings to focus expert attention on issues such as freshwater resources, marine pollution and agricultural practices. Many UN agencies and programmes have prepared papers for UNCED and made changes in their work programmes as a result of the focus provided by the Summit.

Also as part of the '92 Process, the UN is conducting negotiations on international legal agreements for biodiversity and climate change. The results of all efforts are being presented to the Preparatory Committee.

Regional and NGO Inputs

By July 1991, four of the five UN Regional Commissions had held Ministerial meetings to prepare for UNCED. The UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) sponsored a conference on "Action for a Common Future" in Bergen, Norway, in May 1990 which focussed on the economics of sustainable development, sustainability in relation to energy use and industrial activities, and ways to raise public awareness and participation.

The Bergen meeting will no doubt be remembered for the large role played by representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The "Bergen Process" became the model for participation of NGOs in preparations for UNCED.

At its August meeting in Nairobi, the UNCED Preparatory Committee considered how NGOs might participate in the '92 Process. The Committee expected that NGOs would play a large part in the preparation of National Reports that each Government had been asked to submit to the UNCED secretariat by 31 July 1991. The reports were to focus on sustainable development in each country.

As for its own work, the Committee agreed that NGOs with "relevance" and "competence" in UNCED's issues could apply to take part in its meetings. The need to ensure a balance between groups interested in environment and those in development, and between those from the South and the North, would be taken into account. In December, the General Assembly approved this plan.

At the Ministerial meeting on UNCED convened by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in Bangkok in October 1990, NGO participation was not an issue. Ministers stressed that poverty, human health, population pressure and environmental degradation were closely interrelated and had to be viewed as integral to the development process. A second meeting, in February 1991, considered a regional strategy for sustainable development and ESCAP's input to UNCED.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) held a Ministerial meeting in Mexico City in March 1991. It adopted the "Tlatelolco Platform on Environment and Development" expressing concern at the deterioration of the global environment 20 years after the UN Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972), and stressing that without a solution to the debt problem, there would be no environmentally-sustainable development in the region.

When the UNCED Preparatory Committee met in Geneva in March just after ECLAC's meeting, some 190 NGOs took part. Few were from the South. It is expected that more will attend the August session; some 50 representatives of developing-country NGOs will be sponsored by Governments from industrialized countries. In August, the Committee will probably take a decision on how NGOs will participate in the Summit itself.

Ministers of Governments served by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) met in

Cairo in July 1991. A second meeting will be held to finalize Africa's strategy for sustainable development and input to UNCED. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia is scheduled to meet, also in Cairo, from 10 to 13 September 1991.

Other Meetings

Meanwhile, the UNCED secretariat has been convening Working Parties on the issues of the Preparatory Committee's agenda and on a number of multi-disciplinary topics which implicitly underlie that agenda. The Working Parties are made up of invited experts from UN agencies and intergovernmental, non-governmental and public sector groups.

A series of additional meetings, some organized with the UNCED secretariat, is also providing proposals for the Preparatory Committee. A partial listing includes:

- an international conference on an Agenda for Science for Environment and Development (ASCEND 21), to be held in November 1991 in Vienna. The meeting, organized by NGOs in cooperation with the UNCED secretariat, will develop proposals for action on science for sustainable development which will be presented to the UNCED Preparatory Committee for inclusion in Agenda 21, the plan of action to be adopted at the Summit.
- a Global Assembly on Women and the Environment to be convened by the Senior Women's Advisory Group of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) from 4 to 8 November in Miami, USA. The Assembly will discuss water, energy, waste and environmentally-friendly systems from women's perspectives and will hear testimony from women about their ''success stories''—environmentally-sound development projects which could be replicated in other parts of the world.

This meeting will forward its recommendations to the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet (8-12 November, Miami)—a meeting of NGOs concerned with women—for inclusion in the proposals the Congress will submit to the Preparatory Committee. The theme of the Congress: It's Time for Women to Mother Earth.

- an International Conference on Water and the Environment, organized by WMO in Dublin, Ireland, in January 1992, is expected to provide major input to Agenda 21 on the issue of freshwater resources. Government-designated experts and professionals involved in water issues, NGOs and UN agencies are invited to propose strategies for environmentally-sustainable use of water.
- a symposium, Women and Children First, was organized by the UNCED secretariat in Geneva in May 1991. The meeting discussed the particularly severe impact of environmental degradation and poverty on women and children and, among other things, recommended that Agenda 21 recognize women as managers of natural resources and include them in decision-making at all levels.

The participants proposed the adoption of a new model of economic development which would shift Government expenditures from military-industrial activities and structural adjustment policies to activities that would ensure women and children the food, housing and education they need. Ideas from the meeting will be considered for inclusion in Agenda 21.

- a March 1991 consultative meeting organized by UNDP and NGOs on behalf of UNCED provided input for Agenda 21 on the links between poverty and environmental degradation and options for action.
- an international conference on agriculture and the environment, organized by FAO and the Government of the Netherlands in April 1991, assisted the UNCED secretariat in preparing its reports on sustainable agriculture and environmentally-sound land-use.
- the Second World Industry Conference on

Environmental Management, convened by the International Chamber of Commerce in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in April 1991, can also be considered part of the '92 Process. Industry leaders spoke of commitments to reduce environmental pollution by up to 50 per cent in the next few years. Major energy companies such as Shell (Nederlands) said they would reduce pollution caused by exploring, extracting and refining oil and other fossil fuels. They would also ensure that trucks used to transport oil and petrol would produce 50 per cent less of the "greenhouse gases" in the same period. Making a transition to renewable types of energy proved more difficult to address.

▶ a symposium on "Sustainable Development: From Concept to Action" is to be hosted by the Netherlands Government in The Hague from 25 to 27 November 1991. Organized by the UNCED secretariat with UNDP, the Hague Symposium will examine how markets can move economies towards sustainable practices through regulations, economic instruments such as taxes and fees, and the use of education and advertising to influence economic behaviour. It is expected that the symposium will provide useful input to UNCED as did a similar meeting in Founex, Switzerland, prior to the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment.

National Reports

Incorporated into the reports of the Secretary-General at the final session of the Preparatory Committee will be information culled from reports from Governments—National Reports—on the state of sustainable development activities in each country. The UNCED secretariat has worked with UNDP to ensure that all countries, even the least developed, have been given the technical and professional expertise needed to prepare comprehensive, relevant and useful reports. In keeping with UNCED policy, UNDP has also supported the participation of grassroots organizations in these preparations.

Negotiations on Conventions

In separate processes linked to UNCED, the UN is negotiating international treaties which would legally bind Governments to reduce global warming and conserve the diversity of biological life. A possible convention on the preservation and management of forests is also being discussed. The same issues are being considered by the Preparatory Committee for inclusion in Agenda 21, not as legal targets but as objectives to be integrated with other developmental and environmental concerns.

Climate Change. Negotiations for a convention on climate change are being conducted by the General Assembly — which has set up an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee—with support from WMO and UNEP. Negotiations are focussing on areas in which targets must be set to reduce the outpouring into the atmosphere of "greenhouse gases"—mostly by motor cars and industrial smoke stacks—which contribute to the warming of the planet.

It is hoped that a framework convention on climate change will be ready for Heads of State and Government to sign at the Summit. The framework will outline the areas for which detailed targets, to be negotiated later, would be contained in various protocols.

Biodiversity. Negotiations for a convention to protect the world's diverse biological life are entering the final stages, sponsored by UNEP. Discussions have focussed on issues such as access to biological resources, how to use and still preserve those resources, and access to environmentally-sound technology, especially by developing countries. After the June 1991 session of the negotiating committee in Madrid, Mostafa K. Tolba, Executive Director of UNEP, said that although tough bargaining lay ahead, the session had achieved more than anyone had believed possible. There was a strong chance that a meaningful international agreement could be concluded by next June.

Forestry. Consultations on a possible international legal agreement on forests were ongoing in FAO prior to the establishment of UNCED, and it had been hoped that a convention on forestry would be ready for signing at the Summit, though this now appears unlikely.

Forest management is also on the UNCED agenda. Early in the '92 Process, the emphasis was on the need to preserve the remaining tropical rainforests, both as habitats for a diversity of plant, animal and insect life, and as "sinks" to absorb and transform into oxygen the excessive amounts of carbon dioxide now produced mainly by industrialized countries, but in the future, also by developing countries.

Little attention was paid to forests which grow—or used to grow before they were cleared for development—in the temperate and boreal zones of Northern countries. Following a proposal from Malaysia, UNCED expanded its work to include forest management in tropical, temperate and boreal zones. Any agreement on the rational use of forests will include all three areas.

The Summit Agenda

Early in the '92 Process, the Preparatory Committee began to consider the ideas presented by the Secretary-General of UNCED for an agenda for Governments when they meet in Brazil from 1 to 12 June 1992.

Agenda 21. It is likely that at the centre of deliberations in Brazil will be Agenda 21, a detailed blue-print for action to be taken—up to the year 2000 and into the twenty-first century—by Governments, development agencies and United Nations organizations, as well as independent sectors, in every area where human (economic) activity affects the environment. Proposals for Agenda 21 are being negotiated in the Working Groups of the UNCED Preparatory Committee (see below).

It is anticipated that Agenda 21 will detail actions, based on the principles of sustainable development outlined in the Earth Charter. Overall objectives, major global goals and options for action to meet specific targets will be listed issue-by-issue and in reference to cross-sectoral concerns. Organizations responsible for carrying out actions will be named, and completion times and costs will also be listed. Agenda 21 will not be legally binding, but it is expected that Governments adopting it will be highly committed to its implementation.

The UNCED secretariat is proposing that some global goals might be: eradicating poverty to ensure access by the poor to sustainable livelihoods and resources needed for human development; reversing the destruction of renewable resources—soils, water, forests, and biological and genetic resources; and changing the system of incentives and penalties that motivate economic behaviour to better promote sustainability.

International Legal Agreements. Also on the provisional agenda for the Summit is the signing by world leaders of the international agreements on climate change and biodiversity (see Negotiations on Conventions, above).

Earth Charter. It is hoped that each world leader present at the Summit will also sign an Earth Charter, a statement of principles setting out rights and obligations of all nations in relation to the environment. An example of one such principle, Mr. Strong has suggested, is the undertaking not to pollute a river upstream of where others must take drinking water downstream, a concept that has particular significance where waterways flow through several countries. The Charter would be morally but not legally binding.

The Charter may encompass the "precautionary principle"—a commitment to act to prevent worsening environmental conditions even

before all the scientific proof is available, particularly in cases where not taking action could cause irreversible damage or loss of species. The Charter could also include a commitment to the principle of "inter-generational responsibility", whereby Governments today would act as though they were accountable to future generations.

On the individual level, it has been proposed that an informal Earth Covenant should be signed by millions of people all over the world, symbolizing their commitment to work for the sustainability of the planet.

Financing Environmentally-sound Development. The proposals contained in Agenda 21 will almost certainly carry substantial financial implications. Any conventions that are signed will also call for action which developing countries in particular will be ill-equipped to fund. A major topic on the Summit agenda will therefore be how to finance environmentally-sound development.

In addition to calls for the more efficient use of national budgets and increases in the level of official development assistance (ODA) made available by the developed countries, it is likely that the Conference will agree that a variety of funding sources be tapped. Proposals include: debt relief, especially debt-for-nature swaps; linking aid flows to Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) issued by the International Monetary Fund; charging for the use of the "global commons", e.g. use of the ocean for deep-sea fishing or shipping, and use of the atmosphere by aeroplanes; and the creation of private investment funds which might, for example, issue Earth Bonds.

The selling of Earth Stamps, either by Governments or outside the official postal systems, to raise revenue for ecologically-sound development has also been proposed, as has a non-renewable energy tax—a charge on fuels such as oil or nuclear which irreversibly damage the environment.

Trading "rights to pollute" will also be discussed. A "critical load" for say, global warming, would be established for the earth and the load would be made available for trading. In the case of "greenhouse gases", allocations to developing countries might be larger than are needed in the short term. Rights could be sold to industrialized countries which produce more pollution than the quota would allow, to raise funds for developing countries.

Transfer of Technology. If developing countries are to make the transition to sustainable development, they must have access to the best available technology. For the UNCED Preparatory Committee, finding a balance between affordable access to the latest environmentally-sound technology by users in developing countries and fair incentives for and returns on the research and development of that technology, done mostly in industrialized countries, is a key issue.

Monitoring Agenda 21. Also on the agenda in Brazil will be the question of which part of the UN system should have overall responsibility for monitoring, reviewing and reporting on the implementation of Agenda 21.

Various proposals have been made, including strengthening UNEP, taking into account the need to integrate economic development activities with environmental concerns; creating a Sustainable Development Commission to which all UN bodies, agencies, programmes and Convention secretariats would be accountable; and setting up an Economic Security Council equal to the present political Security Council.

Institutional arrangements also need to improve the UN's ability to assess environmental risks and respond to emergencies such as Bhopal, Chernobyl and the Valdez oil spill, which are likely to occur more frequently in the future.

Preparatory Committee

When the Preparatory Committee meets in Geneva from 12 August to 4 September, it will be ready to move from analysis of problems to negotiation of proposals for action. Before the Committee will be some 50 reports prepared by the UNCED secretariat, requested at previous sessions. Some reports give background information on the complex subjects on UNCED's agenda; others propose options for action. This session, Mr. Strong recently stated, is expected to significantly narrow those options. When the Committee holds its final meetings in New York next March, it will work to finalize Agenda 21 for approval at the Brazil Summit.

As at previous sessions, the Committee will meet in Working Groups for the first two weeks of the session. Then, from 26 August to 4 September, members will work in Plenary on "cross-sectoral" issues.

Working Groups. The issues before the Committee are divided among the Working Groups as follows.

Working Group I, under the Chair of Mr. Bo Kelljan (Sweden), will consider possible options for action to:

- protect the atmosphere—issues include global warming, depletion of the ozone layer and transnational boundary air pollution;
- protect the land—issues include forests (deforestation), soil loss (desertification) and sustainable use of land;
- conserve biological diversity and use biotechnology in environmentally-sound ways.

Working Group II, under the Chair of Bukar Shaib (Nigeria), will consider options for action to:

- protect the oceans, seas and coastal areas, including proposals for ocean fishing practices which ensure future supplies, and for coastal development which integrates the needs of increasingly large coastal populations with the impact of human activities on the seas;
- protect the quality and supply of freshwater resources so that all peoples have access to safe, clean water and sanitation facilities;
- ensure the environmentally-sound management of wastes, including hazardous and toxic wastes, and prevent illegal international traffic in such substances. Proposals include prohibiting the manufacture of certain very toxic chemicals and managing hazardous wastes from the beginning of the production process. Proposals for the disposal of solid waste suggest less consumption and more recycling.

Working Group III, which was set up at the March/April session under the Chair of Bedrich Modan (Czechoslovakia), is considering:

- legal matters arising out of Agenda 21 and other areas of the UNCED agenda. This Group will also examine existing legal agreements to determine any gaps which should be filled;
- institutional arrangements, both outside and within the UN, which need to be made in order to implement Agenda 21 and monitor the progress of sustainable development.

Plenary Consideration. In Plenary, the Committee will consider "cross-sectoral" issues which underlie all of the above issues. Some of these are: the raising of funds necessary for environmentally-sound development; the transfer of technology; the development of methods of accounting that integrate economic and environmental factors; and the relationship between the international economic situation and environment and development.

Some of the other issues to be considered in Plenary are:

- how population growth contributes to environmental degradation. In most developing countries, present high growth rates are seen as a constraint on sustainable development;

- the relationship between demographic trends, economic growth, consumption patterns and environmental degradation;
- human development and living conditions of the poor, health, education and human settlements. The Committee will consider the notion of "sustainable livelihoods" for all peoples including specific proposals for ensuring access to food at all times, raising incomes and providing access to land and credit;
- the activities of women, who—as more than 50 per cent of the world's people—have a major impact on every area under discussion at UNCED. In reports to this session, attempts have been made to introduce information on women in relation to each of the sectoral and cross-sectoral issues, including population and poverty.

Who Goes to Rio?

In December 1991, the Assembly will decide, based on a recommendation from the Preparatory Committee, how NGOs will participate in the Summit. A Citizens' Global Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro is being organized by NGOs to coincide with the Summit. (Contact: International Facilitating Committee for UNCED, Palais Wilson, 52 Rue des Paquis, CH-1201 Geneva, Switzerland. Tel.: 41-22-732-7117. Fax: 738-5046.)

Some 10,000 people are expected to attend the Summit at the Riocentro convention facility in Rio de Janeiro. The Secretary-General of the United Nations will be present, along with representatives from the 160 Governments that are members of the UN, including Heads of State and Government and their staff. Representatives from a large number of intergovernmental organizations and UN agencies will be present along with some 2,000 accredited media and NGO representatives.

The UN will also send, from New York and Geneva, secretariat staff—translators, interpreters, Committee secretaries, public information officers and security guards—to Riocentro to run the Conference.

"It will be a difficult conference," Mr. Strong recently stated, "but it will succeed because it has to succeed. To get action on the difficult issues the world faces will require special political focus and energy. That is why the UN General Assembly organized this special conference. This is the first time there has been a legally-mandated global summit conference".

When, he asked, will we get another opportunity to have all our leaders together? We will have the right people there to make the right decisions. Whether they make those decisions is up to the people at the base. We need to hold Governments accountable and they need to be told what we want. The Summit, and our collective future, is in our hands.

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